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LADB Staff

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Polls Suggest Extremely Tight Three-way Mayoral Election In Mexico City In July

by LADB Staff

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The race for mayor of Mexico City remains too close to call three months before the July 2 election. Public-opinion polls conducted in late March show voter preferences in the Mexican capital are almost evenly divided among the three principal candidates: Jesus Silva Herzog of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), and Santiago Creel Miranda of the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). The winner will succeed PRD Mayor Rosario Robles, appointed to the post last year to succeed Cuauhtemoc Cardenas who resigned to focus on his presidential campaign (see SourceMex, October 6, 1999). In 1997, Cardenas was the first democratically elected mayor of the Mexican capital. Until 1997, Mexico City mayors were appointed by the president. A public-opinion poll by the daily newspaper Reforma gives the PRD a good chance of retaining the mayoralty of the capital. The poll, based on interviews with 1,112 people, showed Lopez Obrador leading his two opponents with 31% of voter preference, compared with 27% for Silva Herzog, and 25% for Creel Miranda. But a separate poll commissioned by the daily newspaper El Universal had Silva Herzog leading Creel by a single percentage point and Lopez Obrador by four percentage points. The poll, conducted by Alducin y Asociados, was based on interviews with 1,351 people. Political columnist Sergio Sarmiento said Lopez Obrador and Creel have been gaining ground at Silva Herzog's expense. "Andres Manuel has risen in the polls because of the aggressive nature of his campaign," said Sarmiento.

PRD candidate capturing anti-PRI vote Sarmiento noted that Lopez Obrador appears to be capturing a large percentage of the anti-PRI vote in the Mexican capital. He said many who expressed a preference for the PRD candidate also indicated they would vote for Vicente Fox of the PAN in the presidential election. But Lopez Obrador continues to face questions about whether he has actually met the residency requirements to qualify for the race. As recently as 1997, the PRD candidate was registered in Tabasco state, meaning he has not resided in Mexico City the required five years. But PRD officials said they were confident that the Instituto Electoral del Distrito Federal (IEDF) would rule that Lopez Obrador is qualified to represent the PRD in the mayoral race. Other PRD members running in the PRD mayoral primary last November attempted to make Lopez Obrador's residency an issue, but he won in a landslide (see SourceMex, December 8, 1999). Lopez Obrador has kept his name in the news with such high-profile actions as engaging in a televised debate with PAN former presidential candidate Diego Fernandez de Cevallos. The PRD candidate received more media attention when he accused the PAN and the PRI of negotiating an arrangement to give the presidency to PRI candidate Francisco Labastida Ochoa and the Mexico City post to Creel. The PRI and the PAN have both denied the allegations. "This is a charge that has nothing to do with reality," said Creel, who also has risen steadily in the polls in the past several months. In a recent column in the daily newspaper Excelsior, political commentator Victor Manuel Patraca said Creel's standing in the polls is even more remarkable because he lacks the name...
recognition of his two opponents. "Creel has been overshadowed in the campaign by presidential candidate Vicente Fox, who receives most of the donations and publicity," said Patraca.

**Indictment of former PRI mayor could influence race**

The mayoral election could also be influenced by the controversy surrounding the indictment of former PRI mayor Oscar Espinosa Villarreal. In late March, the Mexico City attorney general's office (Procuraduria General de Justicia del Distrito Federal, PGJDF) filed a formal charge against Espinosa, accusing him of embezzling 428 million pesos (US$45.7 million) during his 1994-1997 term in office. "Espinosa Villarreal authorized actions that would make it difficult to trace expenditures and public resources," Mexico City comptroller Leon Alazraki said in a complaint. But the PGJDF cannot prosecute Espinosa unless the Chamber of Deputies votes to remove his immunity, which he obtained when he was appointed federal tourism secretary in 1997. The lower house, dominated by a coalition of opposition parties, agreed in early April to consider removing Espinosa's immunity. PAN Deputy Francisco Paoli Bolio, the top leader in the Chamber of Deputies, said the lower house hopes to vote on the matter before the legislative session ends April 30. The decision by the legislature to act against the former mayor could be influenced by charges that Espinosa has been improperly receiving a pension from government lending institution Nacional Financiera (NAFIN), even though he has not reached retirement age and continues to work for the government in another capacity (see SourceMex, December 8, 1999). Finance Secretary Jose Angel Gurria Trevino, also accused of receiving an improper NAFIN pension, has agreed to donate the money to several nonprofit organizations. But Espinosa has insisted that he is entitled to the pension and will keep the money. Meanwhile, the PGJDF's decision to bring the corruption charges against Espinosa has raised tensions between the administration of Mexico City Mayor Robles and the federal government. Interior Secretary Diodoro Carrasco said the documents presented by Mexico City attorney general Samuel del Villar lack sufficient evidence to charge Espinosa. Carrasco and other PRI members accused the Robles administration of using the Espinosa case for political purposes. "What they are seeking is nothing more than a scandal," Espinosa said in a press conference. "[This is] a smoke screen to cover up the city's many problems and the failure of their administration." President Ernesto Zedillo said he hoped the investigation would proceed in strict observance of the law. "It would be unfortunate if the case did not follow strict judicial reasoning and responded to political-electoral motives," the president's statement said. In a strongly worded response to Zedillo, Mayor Robles urged the president not to interfere in the case, which is clearly the jurisdiction of the city government. Mayoral candidate Silva Herzog acknowledged the right of the Mexico City government to investigate the handling of finances during the Espinosa administration, but questioned the timing of the charges. Still, the PRI candidate said the case "would in no way" influence the Mexico City electoral process.

**PRI sharply divided in Tabasco after gubernatorial primary**

The PRI, meanwhile, is having to contend with divisions within its ranks. Prominent legislator Arturo Nunez, who left his post as the party's leader in the Chamber of Deputies to run in the Tabasco gubernatorial primary, has accused outgoing Gov. Roberto Madrazo Pintado of manipulating the April 2 election in favor of his chosen candidate, federal Deputy Manuel Andrade. State electoral authorities said Andrade won the race with almost 60% of the vote, compared with 38% for Nunez, and less than 3% for a third candidate. Nunez said the state's PRI machinery, which answers to Madrazo, may have been responsible for swaying thousands of voters toward Andrade.
The Nunez campaign has asked for a review of 80% of the polling stations. "There were all sorts of irregularities [at these locations]," said campaign coordinator Jose Antonio de la Vega. Nunez, clearly displeased that national party leaders have sided with Madrazo, has threatened to ask his followers to vote for an opposition candidate but reiterated he would remain a member of the PRI. The state's opposition parties the PAN, the PRD, and the Partido del Centro Democratico (PCD) are considering running a joint candidate to challenge Andrade in the gubernatorial elections, scheduled for Oct. 15. "We will try to reach an agreement with the opposition because we don't want Madrazo re-elected," Nunez told reporters. Nunez believes Madrazo is the real power behind gubernatorial candidate Andrade. The state party's support of Andrade has raised some questions about whether Madrazo received favorable treatment for agreeing to endorse Labastida after the presidential primary. Madrazo ran a competitive campaign in the PRI primary, but in the end lost because the party machinery threw its weight behind Labastida (see SourceMex, November 10, 1999). PRI Sen. Humberto Mayans Canabal, who represents Tabasco, warned the Madrazo camp to reach a political agreement with Nunez or risk losing the Tabasco gubernatorial seat to an opposition candidate. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on April 5, reported at 9.37 pesos per US$1.00] (Sources: Associated Press, 03/29/00; The Washington Post, The New York Times, 03/31/00; Notimex, 03/29/00, 04/01/00, 04/02/00, 04/04/00; Reuters, 04/01/00, 04/03/00, 04/04/00; The News, 03/21/00, 03/30/00, 03/31/00, 04/04/04, 04/05/00; Notimex, 03/29/00, 04/01/00, 04/03/00, 04/04/00; The News, 03/21/00, 03/30/00, 03/31/00, 04/04/04, 04/05/00; Novedades, 03/22/00, 03/23/00, 03/30/00, 03/31/00, 04/01/00, 04/03-05/00; La Jornada, 03/22/00, 03/30/00, 03/31/00, 04/04/00, 04/05/00; El Universal, 03/30/00, 03/31/00, 04/03-05/00; Reforma, 03/30/00, 03/31/00, 04/01-05/00; Excelsior, 03/31/00, 04/01/00, 04/03-05/00; El Economista, 03/31/00, 04/05/00)